

IS CAPITALISM A FORM OF SOCIAL DARWINISM?

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Abstract: *Although ideas of social Darwinism can be found in Charles Darwin's book *Descent of Man*, the true father of social Darwinism was Herbert Spencer. He attempted to apply the theory of natural selection to human society. Herbert Spencer is the author of the concept "survival of the fittest". But capitalism is an economic and political system that emerged in the Western Middle Ages, more precisely in Dutch and Italian cities that then controlled European trade. Historians call the period from 1870 to 1900 the "Gilded Age", as this was an era of rapid industrialization, laissez-faire capitalism, and no income tax, especially in the United States. Laissez-faire is a form of capitalism in which the government does not intervene in economic competition. It is the same period in which social Darwinism flourished. The great capitalists were delighted that an ideology had emerged to justify their behavior.*

Key words: *conceptual analysis, economic theory, political philosophy*

INTRODUCTION

For over 150 years, researchers in the socio-human sciences have disapproved of capitalism, although the economic success of the West is based on this type of economy. Even a communist country like China has accepted that 40% of its economy be capitalist. Of course, Marxism, which has permeated the socio-human sciences, is largely responsible for this bad image of capitalism. A balanced analysis of the impact of capitalism on English society between 1780 and 1830 was conducted in the book *Capitalism and History*, written by the Austrian philosopher and economist Friedrich von Hayek.[4]

Social Darwinism does not have a better image. Today it is also associated with Nazism, which has taken over the idea that there are higher and lower races and that it is normal and natural for superior races to eliminate the lower ones. But one can read more about the negative impact of social Darwinism in the book by the great English historian Paul Johnson: *Darwin. Portrait of a genius*.[7]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper aims at drawing a conceptual analysis of the interconnections between conceptualizations of capitalist society and social Darwinism from the perspective of political philosophy and economic theory. The present study is a discussion of this conceptual analysis.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Defining concepts

Although the term "capitalism" appears precisely in 1850 in France, it designates an economic reality, which has its beginnings in the Medieval Ages, more precisely in the Italian and Dutch commercial cities. The first modern capitalist countries were the Netherlands and England. The best description of capitalism was given by the British philosopher Adam Smith in his book *The Wealth of Nations*.

By making a conceptual analysis of the vocabulary associated with the ideologies under discussion, it may be seen that certain metaphors such as “the game” metaphor emerge. According to Adam Smith, capitalism means free private economic initiative, trade, the division of labor, and the “invisible hand”. Smith urges the state to be “strong” in “arbitrating” the “Great Game” of the market economy and to provide what we now call “public services,” including education for the poor.[13] Another article of ours discusses in greater detail this conception. [8]

Social Darwinism is an ideology that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century in England, the main person responsible for its creation being the philosopher Herbert Spencer and less Charles Darwin. An ideology is not easy to analyze because it is a mixture of scientific ideas and speculative ideas. Spencer took Darwin's theory of natural selection and applied it to human society, although Darwin had previously applied it primarily to the plant and animal realms.

One of the best written books on social Darwinism belongs to Mike Hawkins: *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought*. Hawkins defines social Darwinism through five main ideas: [5]

- (a) evolution law govern all living organisms, including humans;
- (b) growth of the population on a certain territory determines an intensification of the struggle for existence among people;
- (c) physical and mental traits are inherited and help their possessors survive and reproduce more than others;
- (d) law of natural selection produces new species;
- (e) law of evolution applies to human society, including morality and religion;

The **laissez-faire** economic doctrine appeared in eighteenth-century in France and was promoted by French economists called physiocrats. Laissez-faire was the prominent economic position in Britain in the 19th century, and the doctrines of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and J. S. Mill encouraged its spread.[14]

But the idea of including Adam Smith among the promoters of laissez-faire capitalism is not unanimous. Above we talked about state intervention in the economy, supported by him.

The publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 had an enormous impact on the socio-humanistic sciences. The theory of natural selection had become irresistible to those studying progress: it seemed like a “self-directed machine” that critically analyzes the smallest variations around the world in a continuous process which works, though imperceptibly, towards the perfection of every organism. [1,7]

After returning to England, Darwin showed important interest in political economy, including Adam Smith’s and Malthus’s works.” He also had frequent conversations with a radical laissez-faire publicist, Harriet Martineau, a close friend of his brother. Because laissez-faire economic ideals were so prominent in English intellectual and political life in the mid-nineteenth century, it should come as no surprise that Darwin and Spencer imbibed these ideas”. [8]

Malthus was one of the most important English economists of the mid-nineteenth century, and his ideas influenced Darwin as well as the proponents of social Darwinism. Although Malthus had written primarily about humans, he argued that all species tend to reproduce faster than they can accumulate food, which means that if other factors, such as disease or war, do not limit this growth, hunger will follow, thus reducing population growth. In 1838, Darwin read Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, where he found confirmation of his ideas for the struggle for existence and natural selection.

Thus, Darwin had a favorable attitude toward laissez-faire capitalism, as evidenced by the conclusions of his 1871 book, *The Descent of Man*: the progress of humankind is due to the permanent struggle to ascend to a higher condition, which legitimizes “open competition for all” and the fact that “the most able should not be prevented [...] from succeeding best.” [2]

Richard Hofstadter dedicated an entire chapter to Spencer in his famous book *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, given the fact that his philosophy was extremely in vogue in late nineteenth-century America, being considered “an apology for laissez-faire.” He goes on to add that most leading philosophical thinkers in America were had Spencer to compete with. [6]

Even before the publication of Darwin’s revolutionary book, *On the Origin of Species*, in 1859, Spencer already had used the theory of evolution, but in the Lamarckian version. “In his book *Social statitics* (1851), Herbert Spencer promoted a version of laissez-faire more radical than most of his contemporaries.” [15]

Spencer developed the idea in two directions. The first direction was the idea that the struggle for the survival of the fittest applies not only to individuals, but also to societies and nations. The second direction was the idea that evolution provided an explanation for all economic, social and political phenomena.

Furthermore, Spencer drew attention to the dangers implicated by the struggle concept, pointing out that the lower classes, viewed as “savage tribes” from which the progressive middle class has evolved, have ended up threatening progress through the effects of revolution or unrestricted democracy. [7] There was only one step from this conceptualization towards the idea of class struggle, the central concept of Marxism.

Galton’s career may be divided into two significant segments. During the first one, Galton was engaged in geographical pursuits, African exploration, travel writing, and meteorology. The second part began to influence him after reading *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, written by his cousin, Charles Darwin, in 1859. The book convinced Galton that humanity could be improved through the principle of selective breeding. During this part of his career, he was especially interested in the hereditary explanation and the factors determining what he called human “talent and character”. [3]

As a result, he is considered the founder of eugenics, the science of improving the human race. In his book *Hereditary Genius*, he argued that civilization, although desirable in itself, led to an increase in the number of those deemed “unfit”, which had the unfortunate consequence of preventing nature from eliminating the physically and mentally weak. On the other hand, capitalism today seems unstoppable. Almost every country in the world has adopted a market economy, with the exception of a few, including North Korea, which is still maintaining its communist economy. Today we can see the consequences of 60 years of communism in Cuba: most of the population lives in poverty. Cubans drive 60-year-old cars not because they are fans of the vintage style, but because they cannot afford new ones.

However, capitalism is hardly unstoppable, as political decisions may be conducive to changing the type of economy and governance at a given moment. According to Gray, social evolution is dismissed as “just a modern myth”, which is largely untenable from the point of view of an organized scientific theory regarding the precise workings of this process. [9]

After the fall of communism in 1989, it was difficult for Romanian society to transform and accept the emergence of capitalist economic relations. The favorite slogan of the workers’ protests was “we are not selling our country”. Given that the communist mentality could not disappear overnight, intellectuals who promoted economic and

political liberalism were regarded with suspicion. Foremost among these proponents, H.R. Patapieviçi, depicts the complexity of the 90's mood in Romanian nationals in his book, *Politice [Political Issues]* (1996). [11]

Even today, one hardly encounters Romanian intellectuals or economists daring to promote the values of capitalist societies. The conference on capitalism given by H.R. Patapieviçi at the Bucharest Stock Exchange is one of the exceptions.[12] Romanian society continues to be largely socialist in a myriad of ways, given that a significant number of poor Romanians are still dependent on social assistance provided by the state.

On the other hand, even in communist or post-communist regimes, one may still come across unexpected perspectives on human evolution, such as the approach to eugenics in Chinese society, where eugenicist scientists proposed to improve the Chinese nation by applying evolutionary theory to the whole of humanity. [10]

CONCLUSIONS

Ideologies are meant to be worldviews, which claim to explain the whole reality in which we live. At best we can know through them a small part of this reality, as is the case with social Darwinism. People's thinking is influenced by the reality in which they live, but people have the power to create a social or economic reality on their own. People have the power to limit the action of natural selection in society.

Thus, there is not necessarily a gradual difference between humans and animals, but a qualitative one. Animals cannot oppose natural selection, while humans have this ability. People can choose to be moral, whereas animals cannot. Moreover, caring for the poor and the disabled is a core tenet at the heart of Judeo-Christian morality widely prevalent in Western societies. From all these points of view, loving one's neighbor as one loves oneself appears to be the opposite of social Darwinism.

The laissez-faire capitalist economy preceded the emergence of social Darwinism. Nonetheless, once this ideology emerged, there was a fusion with the doctrine of laissez-faire capitalism. The Darwinian concepts of struggle for existence, natural selection and the survival of the fittest were applied to the economic field. It appears reasonably conspicuous that private competition in the capitalist economy brings innovation, growth and prosperity to society.

If we could give a definitive answer to the question in the title of our article – whether capitalism can be considered a form of social Darwinism, it would tend to be affirmative. Laissez-faire capitalism became part of social Darwinism in the second half of the 19th century, whereas current Western capitalism is largely regulated. Governments closely monitor the proper functioning of the market economy, preventing the emergence of monopolies. Unlike the period of laissez-faire capitalism, today the wealth produced by capitalist society is taxed and redistributed to all members of society, including the poor or the homeless through social programs.

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